# Cutting Down Tobacco

**Top: Wardie Leppan and Daniel Buckles. Bottom: Farhad Mazhar and Farida Akhter**
**(IDRC Photo)**

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*By KJ Shore*

Tobacco is a crop as addictive to growers in the developing world as it is to any user. For them, dependency is economic rather than physical or psychological – but while ready cash is attractive, farmers are beginning to realize that growing tobacco is threatening the health of their families, their land, and their local ecosystems.

Despite the downsides of tobacco production, however, farmers find it difficult to say no to the crop because major tobacco companies provide loans for inputs like fertilizer and pesticides, assured markets, and annual cash payments for harvest. As the companies are often the sole buyer and grader of the crops, farmers are at a distinct disadvantage and find themselves, more often than not, tied to a vicious debt cycle.

Researchers with the Bangladeshi non-governmental organization, UBINIG (Policy Research for Development Alternative), say that even with tobacco's obvious downsides, economic pressures are compelling to producers. Company monopolies in the tobacco market also seriously hinder the development of a competitive economy and have a negative impact on rural markets.

**The true cost of farming tobacco** Tobacco is an intensive crop, requiring high inputs and labour. It requires twice as much work as the next most labour-intensive crop: rice.

Tobacco production also contributes to deforestation, a serious issue in Bangladesh. Each family's wood-fired kiln, or "tandur" used for curing tobacco, consumes close to 10 tonnes of scarce firewood per season. And, once a 72-hour cure cycle is started, it can't be stopped or the leaf will be ruined and a family will go further into debt.

UBINIG's Farida Akhter says the women who run the kilns must stay awake for three days straight. If wood runs low, they must find and burn whatever is at hand or lose an entire season's work. Akhter cites the example of Dardari, an average village with just over 100 kilns: it burns nearly 1 000 tonnes of wood each season, or about 100 000 medium sized trees a year. This wood is not available for other purposes.

Tobacco companies have responded in some areas with reforestation programs, often based on fast-growing eucalyptus. Eucalyptus has no traditional local uses, but it ensures a relatively quick supply of new wood for tandurs. More commonly, however, the companies move their operations to areas that still have natural forests.

Tobacco production also has health impacts, says Akhter. She notes that farm families, including women and children, are exposed to fertilizers and pesticides during planting and growing, toxic tar from green leaves during harvest, and fumes from kilns during curing. While the IDRC-supported project doesn't assess health problems directly, Akhter says that the villagers she meets frequently ask for a doctor to talk about potential health issues.

IDRC Senior Program Specialist Wardie Leppan says that while farmers are often attracted by ready markets and ready cash, only a few seem to do detailed accounting of their actual production costs. Those who do factor in their high labour and opportunity costs, often decide they're better off growing mixed food crops for themselves and local markets rather than tobacco, even if those crops yield less cash in the short term.

**Downsides to tobacco production**

UBINIG's Executive Director Farida Akhter and Managing Director Farhad Mazhar easily list the downsides to tobacco growing: unpredictable prices, uneven cash flow, pernicious effects on soil fertility, and ill health and birth defects from handling agricultural chemicals and tobacco leaf.

Forests are cut down for firewood to cure the leaves and the use of chemicals causes broader damage to the environment. And because tobacco is more than twice as labour-intensive as Bangladesh's next-most intensive crop, rice, children are often pulled out of school to work, especially tending fires to cure the tobacco leaves.

UBINIG and Carleton University (Canada), in collaboration with the Bangladeshi farmers' movement, Nayakrishi Andolon (New Agriculture Movement or NA), have been studying why small-scale farmers continue to grow tobacco despite these concerns. Akhter and Mazhar of UBINIG, and Daniel Buckles of Carleton University's Social Analysis Systems (SAS2) project were at IDRC headquarters in December 2006 to report on research, launched in mid-2006, into the economic pressure to grow tobacco in the developing world, and on helping farming families find ways to change to beneficial crops.

The research is part of a group of three projects – in Bangladesh, Malawi, and Kenya – supported by IDRC through its Research for International Tobacco Control (RITC) program. RITC was set up to build a research, funding, and knowledge base and to spur effective tobacco control policies and programs in developing countries. The goal is to counter the effects of tobacco production and use on health and human development.

Each project tailors its approach to the common problem of helping farmers shift out of tobacco production. The Bangladeshi focus is on diversifying food and market crop production using NA's ecological and cooperative principles.

The Kenyan effort is researching ways of replacing the tobacco monocrop with more

environmentally friendly giant bamboo. In Malawi, where tobacco is a main source of income and foreign exchange, the thrust is to help tobacco farmers diversify away from total reliance on tobacco, not dropping it entirely. Lessons will be shared among farming communities in these countries, and in many others.

**Diversifying crops**

Farida Akhter says that many Bangladeshi farmers who grow tobacco see it as their only option. Tobacco companies encourage them to grow the leaf until their soil degrades, then they move on to remaining fertile areas where crop yields will be higher and wood is available for curing the leaves. She adds that while men tend to like cash crops because lump-sum payments allow them to buy items like motorcycles, women are less enthusiastic. They see the high toll these crops take on family financial stability, family health, and their own energy.

“Women are becoming very vocal,” Akhter says. “If men didn’t want out, women definitely would. I think women’s role is going to be very crucial in this project.”

Akhter says the Nayakrishi Andolon movement promotes food and cash crops that make use of local seed diversity and available organic inputs and are better suited to local ecologies than tobacco. NA has also found that to counter the tobacco companies’ heavy institutional support, it must offer some of its own. This includes establishing community seed huts to facilitate access to local seeds and help farmers save seed from one year to the next. NA is also re-introducing farmers to composting methods to replenish organic matter and soil nutrients depleted in chemical-based systems. Akhter says that composting, common a generation ago, fell from use when tobacco companies introduced chemicals to improve leaf yields. NA is also offering to market crops produced by farmers.

**Methodology is important**

The Bangladesh project relies on community members consulting and collaborating with researchers and with each other to identify alternatives to tobacco. UBINIG and NA are using research methods developed and documented by Carleton University’s SAS2 project.

Daniel Buckles says the project, funded by IDRC, has developed more than 50 tools for the assessment of problems, actors and options, and posted them on the Internet (www.sas-pm.com). The tools are flexible enough to be scaled for simple or complex assessments, depending on the need. They also provide both qualitative and quantitative information that is both evidence-based and people-based. From the collection of tools, researchers and communities can choose those most appropriate to the question at hand and what they intend to do with the results.

Farhad Mazhar says UBINIG’s hopes for the project are to identify local and national barriers to farmers moving out of tobacco production, and to give communities better ways to make informed decisions about the transition to other crops.

He notes that even within Bangladesh, local conditions vary greatly from district to district; this makes it difficult to propose a one-size-fits-all policy to the national government. Rather, he says, the research is aimed at developing a consultation and research process that governments can use to support community analysis of their own tobacco situation and options.

“The methodological question is extremely important here,” he says. “We are trying to see what type of methodology we can set into motion that reinforces the capacity of farmers and communities to respond to the problem.”

While only a few communities are participating directly in the research, Mazhar says that by the time the research is complete, policy analysts, and communities will know that it is possible to shift out of tobacco and how best to structure that process.

**Tobacco control: move, countermove**

The World Health Organization’s Framework Convention on Tobacco Control, was conceived in the mid-1990s and adopted in 2003. To date, it has been signed by 168 countries and ratified by 141, most recently by Nepal on November 7, 2006.

Tobacco kills close to 5 million people a year. Based on current trends, it will kill 10 million people a year by 2020, some 70% of them in developing countries. Tobacco’s further toll includes health care costs, lost productivity, and suffering among smokers, passive smokers, and their families.

The treaty is an attempt to counteract the problem, especially in developing countries. However, as it gains currency, tobacco companies – which have lost revenue in developed nations in recent times – appear to be using economic arguments to undermine the treaty’s measures among developing-country signatories, creating challenges to implementation.

IDRC-sponsored Research for International Tobacco Control (RITC) projects in Bangladesh, Kenya, and Malawi are an attempt to present workable, sustainable, economic options to farmers who have difficulty seeing alternatives to growing tobacco as a means to earn their living.

IDRC’s Wardie Leppan says the tobacco control community so far has focused on tobacco demand and users, but is now realizing it also needs to address production in about 125 countries.

“I think there’s more and more realization that this side is also important,” he says. “With greater tobacco controls appearing in the North, tobacco companies are moving aggressively into the South to try to create new consumers and more producers. Our thinking is to try to undermine some of the economic arguments around tobacco and provide alternatives.”

Leppan says RITC is under no illusion that helping small farmers move out of tobacco cropping will starve the supply. The goal, rather, is twofold: firstly, to undermine the economic arguments used by tobacco

companies to stall the implementation of tobacco control policies; and, secondly, from a development perspective, to help farmers improve their lot and avoid debt cycles, children being pulled from school to work, women going sleepless to run curing kilns, environmental degradation and health hazards such as families sleeping under the same roof as their toxic harvest.

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